Making your own herbal teas

Rhona, from the Grass Roots Remedies Co-op in Edinburgh, gives us a guide to why and how to pick and dry plants for tea yourselves.

Why make your own?

It's an act imbued with ethical principles: by foraging for or cultivating your own herbs to include in your herbal teas you can be sure of the origin of the plants. Some plants incorporated into herbal teas are harvested from unsustainable sources, using unknown labour and environmental practices, and over-harvesting of endangered species.

And of course, it's cheaper, fresher, and more empowering to make your own.

The basic principles of ecological harvesting are:

1. Harvest only plants that you can identify.
2. Pick only where you have permission.
3. Harvest only when the plant is in abundance.
4. Take only 10% of a native plant community and 20% of a naturalised plant community.
5. Gather only from clean, vibrant and healthy plants.
6. Gather only from unpolluted areas.
7. Harvest seasonally: there are specific times in the Earth's cycles and seasons when plants yield the best of their medicine.

To put these principles into practice it is important to develop a reasonable botanical knowledge in order that you can reliably identify the plants and understand their communities.

What to harvest

Common wild plants, naturalised plants and some cultivated plants (which can be easily cultivated in a small garden space, window boxes or pots) are all used in commercially available herbal teas.

In general, the best time to forage foliage from plants is when they are just coming up in spring – before flowering and when the leaves are fresh and green.

Herbs to harvest from the wild include:

Leaves of dandelion, nettle, yarrow, plantain (Plantago major) and mallow, wild rose petals, elderflowers, lime flowers (Tilia cordata /T. platyphyllus/T.vulgaris), and both the flowers and surrounding leaves of meadowsweet and hawthorn.

Growing herbs to harvest and dry for tea:

Mint, sage, chamomile, lemon balm, calendula, hops.

You can use your foraged or cultivated herbs fresh and just pop a couple of tablespoons of them in a tea pot but, in order to have wonderful herbal teas all year round, it's common to dry and store them in airtight containers until you're ready to blend and drink them.

How do I dry my herbs?

Herbs can be tied in bunches and dried in a warm dry environment – ideally in the dark (or not in direct sunlight), but by far the best way, if you want to produce a good quantity, is to buy a herb-drying rack. These are commercially available online. The herbs are ready when they are completely dry to touch, which can take up to four or five weeks, depending on conditions. Spread the herbs out on the drying racks, ensuring they do not overlap.

How to drink

When you grow and prepare your own dried herbs for tea, they do not then come in a tea bag! So, it is time to splash out on an infusion teapot or dedicate a cafetière to brewing teas. If you prefer your tea one mug at a time, get a tea ball. See more on page 33. Herbal teas, ideally, should be left to brew for eight to ten minutes before drinking; that way you can be sure of extracting the useful compounds from the herb.

CommuniTea blends	
Digestive mix	Calendula, Meadowsweet, Chamomile, Mallow
Sleep mix	Hawthorn, Rose, Lime flowers
Relaxation mix	Lemon Balm, Chamomile, Lime flowers, Vervain
Respiratory mix	Elderflower, Mallow, Plantain, Sage

Grass Roots Remedies is an Edinburgh-based workers co-operative whose central philosophy is that herbal medicine is the medicine of the people and should be accessible to everyone. We offer a series of practical courses and workshops including CommuniTea foraging, run the only fully integrated Community Herbal Clinic in Scotland, operating alongside NHS provision, and produce simple resources to enable folks to practice herbalism at home.

www.grassrootsremedies.co.uk

www.facebook.com/Grassrootsremedies